

Mercury control program approved despite objections

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A mandatory program to control mercury emissions from Nevada gold mines was approved by state officials Wednesday over the objections of environmentalists and residents from the neighboring states of Utah and Idaho.

Officials from the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection and representatives of the mining industry successfully argued that the new regulations represent important progress in controlling airborne releases of the toxic substance.

Members of the state Environmental Commission agreed, approving the regulations unanimously.

"We've got to start somewhere, and this is a good start," Commissioner Hugh Ricci said.

Critics called the first-of-a-kind regulations flawed, urging commissioners to delay a decision until they could be strengthened substantially. Among them were residents of Utah and Idaho, states downwind of Nevada mines where high mercury concentrations in fish have prompted "do not eat" advisories in both states. In Utah, the nation's first such advisory for waterfowl was recently issued for two types of duck.

"The ability to profit should not come at the expense of the most basic right, which is the protection of the health of our children," said Tim Wagner of the Utah chapter of the Sierra Club.

Mercury, a neurotoxin particularly dangerous to children and developing fetuses, is released into the atmosphere during roasting and other refining operations used to extract gold from ore. Nevada's new mandatory program is designed to build on a voluntary one that resulted in sizeable reductions in mercury released from mines since 2001.

The program requires all mines that release significant amounts of mercury to install scrubbers and similar technology to reduce smokestack emissions. It also requires enhanced monitoring, testing, record-keeping and reporting beyond the existing voluntary program.

Critics attacked the proposal on a variety of fronts during Wednesday's four-hour hearing. Among concerns were that monitoring would be done only once a year and be conducted by the mining companies. Another was that no

monitoring would be done to measure mercury released from mines by means other than smokestacks.

Elyssa Rosen of Great Basin Mine Watch said a key problem is the regulations don't require reduction in mercury emissions and that mercury discharged into the air could increase as the gold industry flourishes in today's economic climate.

"Nevada is proposing a program with no commitment to reduction," Rosen said. "We're not sure what control means. There is no reduction in this plan."

"There needs to be a reduction in the amount of mercury people are exposed to whether they're in Nevada, in Idaho or in Utah," agreed Justin Hayes of the Idaho Conservation League.

But representatives from several mining companies and the Nevada Mining Association said the industry showed it was committed to reducing mercury emissions through the previous voluntary program and that the new regulations will only further those efforts.

"I think we did the right thing then and I firmly believe we're doing the right thing now," said John Mudge, director of environmental affairs for the Newmont Mining Corp. "We value safety. Profit is secondary."

"What we're here to say today is let's get on with it," agreed Rich Haddock, vice president for environmental affairs for Barrick Gold Corp. "The bottom line here is this industry was willing to step up to the plate and do something quickly."

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